

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH ARMY COLONEL THOMAS J. UMBERG, CHIEF OF ANTI-CORRUPTION, NATO TRAINING MISSION-AFGHANISTAN (NTM-A) VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM AFGHANISTAN SUBJECT: CONFRONTING CORRUPTION IN AFGHANISTAN TIME: 10:33 A.M. EDT DATE: MONDAY, MAY 17, 2010

Copyright (c) 2010 by Federal News Service, Inc., Ste. 500 1000 Vermont Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20005, USA. Federal News Service is a private firm not affiliated with the federal government. No portion of this transcript may be copied, sold or retransmitted without the written authority of Federal News Service, Inc. Copyright is not claimed as to any part of the original work prepared by a United States government officer or employee as a part of that person's official duties. For information on subscribing to the FNS Internet Service, please visit <http://www.fednews.com> or call (202)347-1400

(Note: Please refer to www.dod.mil for more information.)

LIEUTENANT JENNIFER CRAGG (Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Okay. We're going to go ahead and get started. Thank you, everyone, for calling in. And I'd like to welcome you all to the Department of Defense's Bloggers Roundtable for Tuesday (sic), May 17th, 2010. My name is Lieutenant Jennifer Cragg with the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, and I'll be moderating the call today. A note to the bloggers on the call: Please be sure to clearly state your name and organization you're with prior to asking your questions.

And also, before I introduce our guest today, can I get the person who just called in, please -- can I get your name? Q Yes, hi. This is Nick Mottern.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, Nick. You're number six.

Q Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: With that, I'd like to welcome U.S. Army Colonel Thomas Umberg. He's with NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan; he's chief of anti-corruption. Without further ado, I'm going to turn it over to the colonel. Sir, the floor is yours, if you'd like to start with a brief introductory statement, and then we'll go right into questions.

Please go ahead.

COL. UMBERG: Well, thank you, Jennifer. And I appreciate all the interest from the bloggers out there.

What I'd like to do is just talk a little bit about what we do here. We're at NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan, and we focus on building the Afghan National Security Force. That means the police, that are within the Ministry of the Interior, and the army, of course, which

is within the Ministry of Defense. My particular responsibility with respect to building the force is focusing upon corruption.

And in that regard, what we do here -- we train and we also mentor or advise. And so our focus is on focusing upon limiting opportunities for corruption by implementing, mentoring and advising on systems and processes -- that's our primary focus -- that limit opportunities.

So I can give you just a couple examples. Then I'll be happy to respond to your questions.

One challenge that was faced by both the ANP -- that's the Afghan National Police -- as well as the ANA, the Afghan National Army, was the challenge of properly paying soldiers or patrolmen. Historically, the way that would work is that the kandak -- which is the equivalent to an army battalion, roughly -- commander would receive the pay for all his soldiers or patrolmen and then pay the soldiers and patrolmen as he thought appropriate. As you can imagine, that provided opportunity for all sorts of different methods of payment.

So in the course of the last year, NTM-A has partnered with both the police and the army to develop a system of electronic funds transfers. So now about 95 percent of the army soldiers are actually paid electronically, electronic deposits -- I know this sounds amazing here in Afghanistan -- electronic deposits to their bank accounts, so that they or their families can have access to it -- and there's limited -- very limited opportunity for any sort of pilferage -- and the same thing with respect to the police, although it's not at 95 percent. It's in the 70 percent -- 70-plus percent range. That's how the policemen are paid. That's but one example.

Other examples are systems of accounting for fuel. Recently a -- this is a relatively new system -- it consists of dyeing the fuel that we -- (audio break) -- the Afghan national security force blue, so that if it shows up in vehicles that aren't part of the police or the army, that means that it came from -- well, it was illegally purchased or sold.

So we -- (audio break) -- we don't sell, we provide about 33 million -- -- 33 -- \$33 million worth of fuel every month to the Afghan national security force. And I'm told we've already seen a reduction in what we believe to be -- to have lost.

So anyway, so having said that, I'll be happy to respond to your questions.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, sir.

And someone just joined us. Can I please get your name?

Q Yes, this is Troy Steward from Bouhammer.com.

LT. CRAGG: Hey, Troy. Thank you. You were going to be right after Nick.

Q Okay.

LT. CRAGG: So Andrew was the first on the line. Andrew, please go ahead.

Q Sir, good -- or good evening to you. Andrew Lubin here, Leatherneck Magazine. Thanks for taking the time.

COL. UMBERG: Sure. Happy to do so, Andrew.

Q Thank you. Colonel, if we're going to talk about corruption in Afghanistan, the biggest question really is -- there -- the local -- the ANPs. In shura after shura I sat down and listened to the locals complaining that the local police and the local governments are shaking them down, you know, like an -- like an Afghan version of Tony Soprano. What's happening in Kabul is nice; what's happening in the field is diametrically opposite. How can you get this mentoring, this training out to the local guy in the street that's still shaking down his people?

COL. UMBERG: Well, you know, clearly it remains a challenge. And the Afghan population comes in contact with the police quite often. And one of the things that's been done recently is to reduce the -- at least the temptation by increasing the pay of the ANP. So the -- an ANP patrolmen now gets paid about \$165 when they enter the force. And they can be paid as much as \$240 after going through their basic training and reporting to an area where there's -- where it -- where it's really hostile; for example, in southern Afghanistan.

And in the past, when ANP -- when the patrolmen were grossly underpaid, there was -- there were challenges just sort of surviving. And today, on \$165 or \$240, you can live in Afghanistan. Now, you can't live all that well, but you certainly can live. So that's one way to meet the challenge.

The other way to meet the challenge is through training. The ANP -- historically, patrolmen were recruited, then sent to their duty station, if you will. And then the theory was they would be trained after sent to the duty station. That didn't work out all that well. And there's a new system now where ANP patrolmen are trained and then sent to the duty station. Part of the training consists of training with respect to ethics and corruption, and the Islamic and Koranic underpinnings with respect to, in essence, stealing from the community. Because that's what you're doing when you, you know, shake down folks or engage in that kind of graft: you're stealing from the community.

So, I don't know, Andrew. Does that help?

Q Not, really, sir. And I'll be brief, because there's other people behind us. Sir, I mean, General Caldwell, you know, raised the salaries back in December. They're still shaking down the people for five bucks here and 10 bucks there, and that's -- I mean, every survey comes out of Afghanistan, that's what the local -- drives the local

people crazy; whereas they don't really like the Taliban, but they don't like being shaken down by the Karzais.

And it doesn't seem to change. And month after month and year after year, you know, we're hearing this -- you know, it's the same -- we're mentoring them, and they're still stealing. What does it take to get them to stop stealing?

COL. UMBERG: Well, there's still lots of challenges. That's true.

A couple things. One is that the pay really didn't come into full -- fully dissemination to the force until, I believe, the end of February, February and March. And with respect to the training, the training has been relatively recent as well.

Now, is that going to be a panacea? It's not going to be a panacea. It's going to require leadership training. It's going to require some enforcement with respect to those that continue to violate the law, both at the highest levels as well as the patrolman level. All those things. But we're making some progress.

It's a challenge. It's a challenge. And people are still concerned. But it takes some time for these programs to work. You increase pay, and you're not going to see a dramatic difference in 30 days.

Q Okay, thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, sir. Thank you, Andrew.

David, you were next. Excuse me. David, you were next.

Q Great. Hi. This is David Axe with WarIsBoring.com. Thanks for speaking to us today. Appreciate it.

COL. UMBERG: (Inaudible.)

Q Sir, so my question is, with regards to pay, it still requires -- electronic transfers still require that soldiers and patrolmen have access to a modern banking system. How is that a factor in changing the pay system?

COL. UMBERG: Well, with respect to the ANA, that is true, that either they or their family have to have access to a bank. And I recognize that this is somewhat surprising. It was surprising to me. But there is sufficient coverage of banks that either they or their families can get access to bank accounts.

With respect to some remote locations, particularly in regard to the police, it is a challenge.

And with respect to the police, there's a program now through Roshan called the M-Paisa program, where the -- a code is sent to a cell

phone -- and I know this sounds strange as well, but there are about 12 million cell phones now in Afghanistan. A code is sent to a cell phone, and then the patrolmen brings that into a Roshan office -- which would sort of be the equivalent in the West of a Western Union office -- and they're paid in that fashion. So it's not the -- it's not 100 percent. It's still in the 70-percent range within the ANP, but it's rapidly growing.

Q Okay, great. Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, sir. Thank you, David --

COL. UMBERG: Thank you, David --

LT. CRAGG: Sorry about that, sir.

Chuck, please go ahead.

Q Sure. My name's Chuck Simmins. I'm with America's North Shore Journal.

Sir, with respect to corruption, grand juries in the United States debate what is official corruption all the time. What constitutes corruption in Afghanistan? And are we -- are we interfering with the cultural norm, or do they really not want -- do they really want the Western concept of anticorruption?

COL. UMBERG: Well, let me first deal with the second part of your question. The cultural norm -- I reject that, and I think that most people who have dealt with average Afghans also reject that. There's not a cultural norm with respect to corruption.

If you took -- for example, if you took a million dollars and you put it in a room near Times Square, and you grabbed 10 persons from Times Square and you put them in that room and you said, "No one's going to know if you take any part or all that million dollars, but we'd like you not to take it," inevitably, that \$10 million (sic) would be gone, very quickly.

Same here -- is two things. One is that if you don't have systems in place that limit opportunities for corruption, you're going to have it. And then, as was addressed by David, if you don't pay adequate salaries, then you also create an environment for corruption.

In terms of how you define corruption here, the -- corruption is defined in the law fairly -- in fairly detailed fashion. And in the law, it describes corruption as everything from not basically giving the government an honest day's work for an honest day's wage, as well as taking bribes and the like.

I'll tell you how I define corruption, and when we talk to folks in training and advising: We define corruption as where you put your personal interests above that of your job or your mission. So for example, if you are hiring someone based on criteria other than what --

who would do the best in that job, that's corruption. Obviously, to take a bribe, that's corruption -- you take a bribe to do something that is a deterrent to the mission.

We -- we're not trying to impose sort of western values. I don't think we need to impose western values. The Islamic and Koranic underpinnings -- as you know, virtually everyone here is Muslim -- they're pretty strong and profound with respect to corruption. So we don't -- we don't need to impose our values upon them.

Q Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, sir. Thank you, Chuck.

Carl, please go ahead.

Q Thank you. This is Carl Forsberg with the Institute for the Study of War. Thank you for your time, sir. I wonder if you could talk, sir, some about what's being done to address the subversion of the formal chain of command in the Ministry of the Interior, especially with regards to the fact that in many provinces local power brokers are controlling ANP units and the Ministry of the Interior in Kabul really has no official chain of command over these units.

COL. UMBERG: Well, Carl, that's a pretty broad statement. Certainly there are still issues -- many, many issues to be addressed in the ANP. And one of General Caldwell's focuses here is to focus on leader development, and also on creating systems to encourage both leader development and the appropriate selection of leaders.

The ANP began with a merit-based selection board. It's been about a year now. And that's something that needs to happen. They need to select commanders and make assignments based on merit. And it's something that's happening -- not as quickly as we would like, but something that's happening.

Q I guess perhaps to be more specific, in Kandahar especially there -- they'll have reports that a number of ANP units report to local power brokers, some of whom are under Ahmed Wali Karzai's influence. I wonder if there's sort of any attempt to address the fact that the formal Ministry of the Interior officials in Kabul are sort of -- if you will, accede to the fact that some local power brokers maintain operational control over ANP units.

COL. UMBERG: Well, there certainly have been commanders who have been removed from command here in the last several months. And within the MOI there's a relatively recent development, the development of the mobile anti-corruption teams, whose mission it is to investigate the kinds of corruption you're talking about -- for example, kandak commander.

I have personally been out on investigations with a mobile anticorruption team to investigate allegations of corruption with respect to kandak commanders.

So they're heading in the right direction -- not there yet, but heading in the right direction.

Q Okay. Thank you, sir.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, sir. Thank you, Carl.

And Captain Sukosh (sp), please go ahead.

Q All right. Yes, sir, I just had one quick question. You said the ANA is receiving electronic transfer. Is that a hundred percent of the ANA?

COL. UMBERG: I think it's 95 percent right now.

Q Ninety-five percent. Okay, that was the only one. Thank you, sir.

COL. UMBERG: Good. Thank you. That was an easy one.
(Laughs.)

LT. CRAGG: (Laughs.) We'll go back one more time around, Chris, so in case you have any follow-up questions.

Q Okay.

LT. CRAGG: Nick, you were next. Please go ahead.

Q Yes, hi. My name is Nick Mottern. I write for Truthout.org.

And I know that you have a background in drug enforcement. I don't have to go into detail about that --

COL. UMBERG: That's -- no, you're right. I did -- I was involved in drug enforcement, at several different levels.

Q Yeah. There's a report, United Nations Office on Drug (sic) and Crime, "Addiction, Crime and Insurgency: (The) Transnational Threat of Afghan Opium." I don't know if you're familiar with that report or not, but it does talk about 90 percent of the world's opium coming from Afghanistan, and only about 2 percent is seized there. And they say that this is actually something of an international crisis, because the drugs are also beginning to infect Central Asia.

And one of the arguments that they make in the report is that this could lead to the -- I guess they're calling it the loss of Central Asia and its energy supplies.

And my question is, do you know of or do you have a concern at all about any U.S. entities -- individuals or agencies, private or part of the government -- who are involved in the drug trade in Afghanistan?

Have you seen any evidence or do you have any concerns about U.S. involvement in drug trade there?

COL. UMBERG: You mean U.S. involvement in actually facilitating or promoting drug trade? Is that what you mean?

Q U.S. involvement in either directly transporting or facilitating or in looking the other way while these transactions occur. I know that, from reading this report, there's a very porous border in the region of Baluchistan, where drugs apparently flow very freely into Pakistan.

And the United States has been in this region operating fairly intensively and throughout Afghanistan since 2001, and so it would seem to me that at this point the U.S. would have knowledge of, whether corruption or through, you know, covert policies, the U.S. was involved with this in any way, because it seems that it's a rather extraordinary flow that's going on that doesn't seem to be able to be stanchd.

So I'm just curious as -- what -- you know, I'd love to hear your perspective on this now, you know, I -- and how you see this, because when it comes to corruption in Afghanistan, wouldn't drugs be the number-one -- you know, opium be the number-one corruption issue?

COL. UMBERG: Well, Nick, you've raised a number of different issues.

First, with respect to opium in particular, is it a problem? Yes. It's a huge problem. It's both a problem because it helps to fund the -- our enemies, number one; number two, because it leads to addiction among the population, which is horrendous; number three, it also contributes to corruption; number four, when it's exported, it causes issues in nations to which it's exported. So it -- yeah, it's a problem.

Number two, is the United States or any of our allies complicitous in any sort of large-scale drug manufacturing, sale, distribution? And the answer to that is no. I have no information, nor do I think any information's being withheld from me with respect to whether or nor there's any agency in the United States that is complicitous in the drug trade.

Now we do have a challenge, especially in the poppy-growing regions, because there's a close connection, as I mentioned, between poppy, opium and the insurgency. And one of our first challenges is to first clear -- as you know, our strategy -- clear, build -- excuse me -- clear, hold and then build -- and we have to first focus on security, which means that we have to prioritize that for right now.

And in terms of our drug strategy, our drug strategy is to go after the labs and interdict rather than attack the poppy fields, which is the -- which is actually the same strategy that was -- that was adopted under the first Bush administration with respect to what's going on in Latin America.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, sir.

And Troy, please go ahead.

Q Okay. Thank you. Sir, this is Troy Steward from Bouhammer.com. You know, back in -- I guess it was, when I was there, April 2006, when we took away the ability for ETTs and mentors to pay and control the pay for, at that time, just ANA forces. Because by the time we took over ANP it was already happened. But when we took -- when that happened, we lost all control, and we lost a -- and we lost a big -- a big part of the fight in corruption when we -- when the ETTs and the Americans cannot control paying military members of the Army when they actually show up for work. I know under that time, then-General Eikenberry was really pushing hard to make it look like we were succeeding in a lot of areas when we weren't. So that was a big step, and it was touted that, you know, they're handling their own pay.

Is there any thought, as we go back and look at the corruption going on now, especially with pay and commanders sending soldiers out to the field so he can collect their pay for them when the pay team comes, stuff like that, to get the U.S. mentors, ANP, ANA mentors back involved, or at least get them to have a direct line of communication to somebody in Kabul when they see corruption and have action taken on that?

COL. UMBERG: Well, I'm not sure I agree with your premise. I actually believe that, in terms of the nexus between pay and corruption, you've seen a dramatic reduction because of the electronic funds transfer. And then with respect to the ANP, to the extent of the 25 percent that aren't paid either through the electronic funds transfer, the Roshan M-Paisa methodology, is that there is a coalition member who is there when the patrolmen receive their pay.

So I'm not -- I'm not suggesting there's not still corruption both in the ANP and the ANA, but I do think that the electronic funds transfer and M-Paisa program have done quite a bit to reduce that opportunity.

Q So because the EFT -- the fund transfer is happening now, you're thinking it's eliminated that avenue for people to be corrupt in that way? There's no more pay teams visiting anymore?

COL. UMBERG: Yeah, I don't think -- you know, there's no system that's completely foolproof. But has it dramatically reduced the opportunities for corruption? The answer to that is unequivocally yes. I don't think we'll go back to the -- sort of the manual distribution of pay.

I'm sorry, the second part of your question was?

Q Well --

COL. UMBERG: Again, where there's a will, there's a way. There's still -- there's -- you know, there's still -- if you've got a

corrupt commander who takes pay from soldiers and patrolmen, you still have an issue. But it's tougher now than it was before.

Q Well, the second part, sir, was -- you know, are -- is there an avenue set up for mentors -- American mentors? You know, it's kind of gone back a little bit to being more heavy handed, involved in Afghan stuff, policies.

But is there a way to get them direct -- to report that directly to someone that has followed up on investigating (on ?)? Because before it went through all the levels of, you know, kandaks, brigades, corps, mentors, all the way up. And it wasn't always followed up on. And we -- and reports just kept going up about corruption, and nothing ever happened. So the American mentors just, you know, threw their hands up and said, you know, why are we wasting our time doing this anymore? No one ever does anything.

So I'm kind of looking for like an express line or, you know -- (word inaudible) -- the express lane to get that word up and have it investigated.

COL. UMBERG: I think we're doing better with respect to reports and then follow-up of reports of corruption. But the system is not perfect. Right now when there's corruption -- for example, in the kandak or the battalion level -- that's reported to IJC. And we have -- it sounds like you've been over here. We've got law enforcement professionals that are assigned to battalions, U.S. battalions that are partnering with both the ANP as well as the ANA, and it gets reported that way.

So it does get reported up. We have -- in the military there's a quite effective military system of -- military, when I say military, I mean Army -- justice. And on the ANP side, as I mentioned before, we have mobile anti-corruption teams that are moving out. And we have -- in each of the provinces and districts, as you know, we've got investigative teams.

But again, you know, I don't want to oversell this. We still have challenges. We're not there yet.

Q All right. Thank you, sir.

LT. CRAGG: I wanted to go around the horn one more time, but we're simply running out of time. So with that, if anyone has a follow-on questions, please simply send it my way and I'll forward it out to the colonel.

I want to take this opportunity to turn it back over to the colonel. If you have any closing statement, sir, please, the floor is yours.

COL. UMBERG: Well, thank you. Those are excellent questions.

We still have challenges here. I think that the arrow was pointed in the right direction, but it requires focus, dedication, and in particular focus and dedication by the Afghan forces.

And the one thing that has really inspired and impressed me here is that, especially among the young people, the young people are both dedicated and willing to serve -- and in some cases even die for -- their country. And they're also not tolerant of corruption.

Young people, I think, are becoming much more both sophisticated and aware of what that does to their country. And I'll just give you one quick example. I was on an investigation several months ago, and a young, 24-year-old sergeant who was reporting corruption on behalf of a more -- a senior officer -- at some risk to himself -- said that -- I asked him how he had the courage to come forward, and he said, "I do this for my faith, my family and my country. I'm staying here."

So, anyway, there are lots of stories like that, which are inspiring to all of us. And I think that, you know, if we stay the course with respect to -- I guess, strike that last statement -- (laughs) -- but if we -- if we continue to focus here and limit opportunities for corruption, and the force -- the quality of the force continues to grow, that we're going to see some pretty dramatic improvements over the next couple of years.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, sir.

And while I have everyone on the call, I just wanted to let you all know we're going to have another bloggers roundtable on Friday -- that's May 21st -- at the same time, 10:30. I'll be sending out a bloggers roundtable invite later this week. I just wanted to let you all know that we're going to have another bloggers roundtable -- again, on Friday the 21st, at 10:30. More information to follow.

Thank you, everyone, for calling in today. Thank you, sir, for talking to us about this very important topic.

And just to remind everybody, you can grab the audio file and the transcript if you visit www.dodlive.mil, click on "bloggers roundtable," and there you'll find information. And as soon as we get the transcript, I will forward it to everyone via e-mail.

Thank you again, sir, for participating today, and for everyone on the call.

This ends today's bloggers roundtable.

COL. UMBERG: Good. Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you. END.